THE RELATION BETWEEN THE DIVIDED LINE AND THE CONSTITUTIONS IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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Abstract: This essay argues that there is an important analogy between the hierarchically ordered divisions of the divided line in Republic Book VI and the hierarchy of constitutions described in Books VIII–IX. Imagination corresponds to tyranny, belief to democracy, mathematical understanding to oligarchy, and dialectical reason to timocracy. The unhypothetical principle disclosed through the activity of dialectic, the idea of the Good itself, corresponds to the aristocratic rule of philosopher kings.

I
Introduction

Socrates first sets out to discuss the five kinds of constitutions at the end of Book IV of the Republic (445c). This task, however, is postponed and only taken up again once the allegories of the sun, the cave, and the divided line have been fully elaborated. The fact that the constitutions cannot be properly discussed without this ontological and epistemological framework suggests that there is an important relation between these allegories and the later constitutional discussion. In this essay, I argue that the hierarchically ordered divisions of the line correspond to the hierarchy of constitutions and types of souls described in Books VIII–IX. Imagination corresponds to tyranny, belief to democracy, mathematical understanding to oligarchy, and dialectical reason to timocracy. The unhypothetical principle disclosed through the activity of dialectic, the idea of the Good itself, I take to correspond to the aristocratic rule of philosopher kings. On this interpretation, philosophical aristocracy is the rule of the Good itself, timocracy is the rule of ideas in their separation from one another, oligarchy is the rule of numbers, democracy is the rule of opinion, and tyranny is the rule of immediate feeling, appetite, and sense perception. This correspondence reveals a deeper unity of Plato’s political and metaphysical-epistemological projects in the Republic than has generally been agreed upon.

Though scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the compatibility between the sun, line and cave images, the intimate connection between

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3 R.C. Lodge also offers a political-ethical interpretation of the line. Yet the analogies which he identifies with each level of the line are scattered throughout the Republic and the rest of the Platonic corpus, making them somewhat arbitrary. See R.C. Lodge, The Philosophy of Plato (London, 1956), esp. pp. 77–82.

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Plato’s political consideration of the constitutions and the ontological/epistemological interest of the line has been completely overlooked. Perhaps this correspondence between the levels of knowing and being on the divided line and the kinds of constitutions has not been widely noticed because there are five constitutions, yet only four sections of the line. Beyond this apparent structural discrepancy, however, the similarity between the order of constitutions and the levels of the line is striking. In each of the four sections of the line – ‘the first part knowledge, the second thought, the third trust, and the fourth imagination’ (511d8–e2) – thought is divided from the form of being it apprehends, with which it seeks to be united in certainty. Each level constitutes a degree of the imperfect union of thought and being. Likewise, in relation to the levels of imperfect political regimes, Socrates says that ‘you have asserted that there are four forms it is worthwhile to have an account of, and whose mistakes are worth seeing’ (544a). The treatment of the various constitutions in Book VIII does not actually extend to the perfect aristocratic constitution which was already treated in Book V. Rather, as with the analogy of the line, only the imperfect regimes are treated. Socrates lists these ‘four forms of badness’ (449a) in the order corresponding to the description of the line cited above:

the one that is praised by many, that Cretan and Laconian regime; second in place and second in praise, the one called oligarchy, a regime filled with throngs of evils; and this regime’s adversary, arising next in order, democracy; and then the noble tyranny at last, excelling all of these, the fourth and extreme illness of a city. (544c)

Yet what corresponds on the line to the fifth and perfect constitution, the rule of philosopher kings? Beyond the four levels of the line lies the idea of the Good itself, beyond the division of being and knowing (508d–509c).  

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4 Some interpreters have even understood the line to be essentially tripartite or bipartite, interpretations which would also conceal any analogy with the constitutions from view. Though I have attempted to portray the line as non-controversially as possible in what follows, I hope that the analogy between my representation of the line and the constitutions will suggest strongly, against any reading of the line as fundamentally bipartite, tripartite, or having no essential connection to the Good, that the line consists of four progressively divided relations of what is absolutely united in the Good. For a summary of these other views on the line, see Yvon Lafrance, Pour interpréter Platon, I: La ligne en République VI, 509d–511e. Bilan analytique des études 1804–1984 (Montréal/Paris, 1987).


6 See also 445c–d, where it is made clear that though there are five constitutions, these are divided into one perfect regime and four imperfect ones.

7 Although this is not made explicit by the allegory of the line, the fifth stage of the ascent is made clear through the allegory of the sun.